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On Mutual Assured Destruction, Preemption, and SDI

"MAD was never U.S. policy, if one defines it as "pure deterrence." It existed from roughly 1970 on as a technological reality as opposed to a policy." (p. 85)

"Mutually assured destruction then was not the result of rational agreement to maintain a limited number of invulnerable nuclear weapons, but the result of the inability of U.S. nuclear weapons technology to maintain a counterforce edge as a result of the increased number of Soviet hardened missile silos." (p. 83)

Tony Polumba, "First Strike: Shield for Intervention,"
in The Deadly Connection, ed. Joe Gerson

Another major factor leading to the "technological reality" of MAD was the infeasibility, then and for the foreseeable future, of a population defense by ABM. (Even a cost-effective defense of missiles was not feasible in the late-60s and early-70s--nor was it necessary, given the limitations then on accuracy and the effectiveness of hardening--so that the ABM Treaty was politically achievable more for technical reasons than because of any aversion to defense in principle or pursuit of stability by either side.

Appeals to stability, and to the "principle" of achieving it by "leaving" populations vulnerable and enemy forces invulnerable, were simply rationalizations making it politically easier for each government to forego enormous expenditures--in the context of an agreement in which the opponent would also forego this effort--for weapons that would be essentially ineffective and useless from any point of view, but which would nevertheless have been built, in the absence of an agreement, because of pressure from the respective military-industrial complexes and the appeal of matching the other's systems.

It was foreseeable that eventually BMD--defense of ballistic missile silos, by a variety of means including terminal ABM--would become feasible and perhaps cost-effective. At that time, one could foresee, there would be pressure to scrap or modify the ABM Treaty, by MIC components associated with ABM developers and others associated with the USAF and their desire to "preserve the land-based leg of the Triad," i.e., USAF ICBMs. The opposition to such a change would cite the great cost and the lack of necessity to do so (given US reliance on SLBMs: in the absence of any tangible threat to these), and the political danger of opening the

door to a program of population defense--appealing but infeasible and infinitely expensive--and finally, the likelihood that this would make the Soviets unwilling to contemplate reducing their offensive forces and might even stimulate them to reject existing limits on these and to increase them sharply, leading in turn to US increases.

Why would even BMD have this latter effect on the Soviets? After all, an improved ability to protect U.S. land-based missiles from Soviet attack, whether by hardening, terminal defenses, or by mobility, does not reduce Soviet ability to retaliate, and thus to deter U.S. attack. If the latter were the only objective of Soviet strategic forces--i.e., if the Soviet policy were "Type I Deterrence-only"--there would be no need for the Soviets to increase their forces in response to measures to reduce the vulnerability of U.S. strategic forces. But then they would not need now the scale or type of forces they have built.

Most analysts do, in fact, expect the Soviets to increase their offensive forces if the US goes ahead with ABMs, even if they are limited to terminal defense (unlike the SDI). This reflects their inference--inescapable from actual Soviet doctrines and posture--that Soviet aims include both "second-strike damage limitation" and its corollary, an ability effectively to preempt. And probably this is sought not only for "insurance" and preservation of their society and strength if deterrence should fail, but for reasons similar to the Pentagon's as well: to pose a threat of Soviet escalation, up to full-scale preemption, to deter the US from entering, or escalating, a direct combat involvement with Soviet forces. Another aim, also political, would be simply to assure that the Soviets are perceived as having the same functional capabilities (in this case, for preemption and damage-limiting counterforce attacks) as the US, not to be "inferior."

The Star Wars program could always have been predicted to have these effects on the Soviets, even if it were limited to BMD --i.e., terminal defense (and perhaps some mid-course layer of defense) protecting hardened sites, not cities. With a boost-phase layer of defense, and the avowed objective of protecting cities, the Soviets would be challenged to increase their offensive forces even if their objectives were only Type I Deterrence.

Here again, it could be argued to the Soviets by Freeze supporters that they **should** restrict their aims to deterrence-only--since damage-limitation is both delusory and destabilizing--and that for this aim they already have far more warheads than they need to deter the US, even with a US Star Wars program: given the actual, foreseeable limitations on the effectiveness of any population defense. However, both parts of this argument are likely to fail to persuade the Soviets. Gorbachev could probably not persuade or compel the Soviet military to give up the objective of damage-limitation, or preemptive capability; the Soviets, after their World War II experience, seem, if anything,

more wedded to these aims, in principle, than USAF (though for perhaps different reasons). Nor would they be willing to gamble on the ineffectiveness of the US Star Wars technology. Not only do they make "worst case" assumptions like the US--both for military conservatism and, probably, for Soviet MIC incentives--but they evidently have an exaggerated, somewhat magical, fear of US technical prowess.

Nevertheless, the truth is that Star Wars, at its most effective, will not affect the "technological reality" of MAD as a condition (and BMD alone, or as a component of Star Wars, would reinforce it). That is, it will continue to be true that each side will retain the capability to destroy the cities of the other even after the other's most effective first strike. This is the essence of MAD: that even striking first, in the most efficient possible way, will not deprive the opponent of the ability to annihilate your urban population. This is not only true today, as it has been for both sides for about twenty years; virtually all analysts, even in the Reagan Administration (except for Wood and Teller at the Labs, Reagan and Weinberger) agree that it would continue to be true after deployment of the most effective SDI foreseeable twenty years from now.

Indeed, although supporters of the ABM Treaty ascribe past and current stability to it--both leaving populations at risk on both sides, and making arms limitation agreements possible--almost nothing in the strategic equation would be different today had there never been any of the these treaties. There would probably have been a lot of money wasted on both sides on ABM systems that did not deliver any more effectiveness in protecting cities than the Soviet anti-aircraft defenses since World War II.

That does not mean that it will make no difference to the future if the Reagan Administration succeeds in wiping the ABM Treaty off the books, or effectively guts it. The new technologies, if backed by the kind of money Reagan proposes to devote to them, not only promise effective terminal defense but an ominous uncertainty as to a degree of population defense (where past technologies could not even raise this "fear". Most of all, they enhance antisatellite threats, posing a very high likelihood that the side striking first could sweep space clean of the opponent's command and control, intelligence and warning capabilities, along with its Star Wars defenses. (Again, if the opponent placed no premium at all on damage limitation or preemption or the threat of escalation, this prospect would not be so ominous; retaliation against cities could still be assured. But the Soviet Union is not such an opponent).

Moreover, if new agreements limiting offensive arms were to be no more constraining than past ones have been, the abandonment of the arms control effort would have little effect on the prospects of strategic stability. But the current prospects in the arms build-ups, in contrast to past years, are for an imminent worsening of crisis stability. There is an urgent need for

11

agreements that would be far more restraining than past ones, effectively stopping the arms buildups on both sides altogether, to avert the oncoming generation of counterforce weapons. This would be true even without any prospect of Star Wars programs; with the deployment of Star Wars, both arms race stability and crisis stability will decline still further, to even more dangerous levels. And even a high level of Star Wars research, long before any deployment, will preclude the sorts of moratoriums and Freeze agreements that are urgently necessary.

All this is true despite the fact that Mutual Destruction will indubitably continue to be Assured, whether the new weapons are built or not, whether Star Wars defenses are deployed or not. Neither side has any prospect whatever of ever being able to destroy, by a first strike, the ability of its opponent to retaliate massively against its own cities.

[February 1986 Note: Yet--in the informed view of John Pike of FAS--the U.S., in particular, may be able to achieve for a limited time, a decade or so starting a decade from now, a distinct asymmetry in its favor of damage-limiting capability in a preemptive first strike, based on imminent improvements in its counterforce weapons, ASAT, "decapitation" capabilities against Soviet C3I, and Star Wars. It is this that the Reagan Administration is pursuing, for use in "nuclear diplomacy."]